

OCTOBER 18, 1976

ELECTION '76: QUESTION MARKS WITH TWO WEEKS TO GO
ANNCR:

THE TWO LATEST NATION-WIDE VOTER SURVEYS GIVE DEMOCRAT JIMMY CARTER A SIX PERCENTAGE POINT LEAD OVER PRESIDENT FORD, THE IDENTICAL FINDINGS COMING AFTER THE SECOND TELEVISED DEBATE. WITH JUST TWO WEEKS REMAINING BEFORE ELECTION DAY, CHARLES MEDD HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE:

JIMMY CARTER'S LEAD IN THE POPULAR OPINION POLLS THAT ALMOST DISAPPEARED AFTER HIS FIRST DEBATE WITH PRESIDENT FORD IS NOW UP AGAIN FOLLOWING DEBATE NUMBER TWO. A SIX PERCENTAGE POINT MARGIN AT THIS STAGE OF MOST ELECTION CAMPAIGNS WOULD SEEM FORMIDABLE, IF NOT INSURMOUNTABLE. BUT FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, FEW PEOPLE -- INCLUDING PARTISAN DEMOCRATS -- ARE LOOKING AHEAD WITH FULL CONFIDENCE. THE BASIC CAUSE OF ALL THIS UNCERTAINTY IS SIMPLE ENOUGH: THE VOTERS THEMSELVES ARE UNSURE, AND WITHOUT THEIR HELP THE EXPERTS ARE, TOO.

AMONG THE EXPLANATIONS MOST OFTEN HEARD ARE THE FAILURE OF BOTH CANDIDATES TO IGNITE MUCH ENTHUSIASM AMONG THE GENERAL PUBLIC AND THE ABSENCE OF CLEARLY DEFINED ISSUES AROUND WHICH POPULAR SUPPORT CAN BE RALLIED. UNMOVED BY EITHER THE CANDIDATES OR THE ISSUES, AND STILL RESENTFUL OF THE WATERGATE SCANDALS, MANY AMERICANS ARE SAID TO BE INDIFFERENT OR UNSURE OF WHO TO VOTE FOR OR EVEN WHETHER TO VOTE AT ALL.

FURTHER OBSCURING THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK IS THE APPARENT BREAKDOWN IN REGIONAL VOTING PATTERNS WHICH HAVE TRADITIONALLY PROVIDED THE GUIDELINES FOR ELECTION-WATCHERS. NORMALLY

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES RUN STRONGEST IN THE INDUSTRIAL NORTHEAST, REPUBLICANS IN THE LARGELY AGRICULTURAL HEARTLAND OF THE MIDWEST. BUT WITH SO MANY CATHOLIC VOTERS DISTURBED BY MISTER CARTER'S POSITION ON ABORTION AND HIS OWN BAPTIST RELIGION, THE NORTHEAST IS FAR FROM SECURE FOR THE DEMOCRATS. AND WITH A LARGE SEGMENT OF THE FARM POPULATION STILL INCENSED BY PRESIDENT FORD'S EMBARGO OF THE SOVIET GRAIN EXPORT AGREEMENT, THE HEARTLAND IS NO LONGER AN INVULNERABLE REPUBLICAN STRONGHOLD.

IN ITS MOST RECENT SURVEY OF REGIONAL OPINION, THE NEW YORK TIMES FOUND MISTER CARTER STILL FAR AHEAD IN HIS NATIVE SOUTH AND FOR THE FIRST TIME WELL AHEAD IN THE MIDWEST AS WELL. IN THE REMAINING REGIONS -- THE NORTHEAST AND THE FAR WEST -- THE CARTER MARGIN IS BOTH SLIGHT AND PRECARIOUS.

UNDER THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE SYSTEM, VOTES ARE COUNTED ON A STATE-BY-STATE, WINNER-TAKE-ALL BASIS, AND SINCE ELECTORAL STRENGTH IS BASED ON POPULATION, IT'S THE BIG STATES THAT DETERMINE ELECTION OUTCOMES. THIS FACT ADDS TO THE POTENTIAL INFLUENCE OF MINORITY CANDIDATES, ESPECIALLY FORMER SENATOR EUGENE MCCARTHY, WHO MIGHT DRAW ENOUGH DEMOCRATIC VOTES AWAY FROM MISTER CARTER TO GIVE SOME CRITICAL STATES TO PRESIDENT FORD. THE MCCARTHY FACTOR INJECTS ANOTHER QUESTION MARK IN AN ALREADY CLOUDED ELECTION PICTURE. AND WHILE THE LATEST POLLS SUGGEST A CARTER VICTORY, WITH TWO WEEKS AND ONE MORE DEBATE TO GO, THE BEST BET REMAINS NO BET AT ALL.

PBH